

# EDITORIAL: Trains and buses come first, but don't put a hold on better roads

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## Editorials

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Workers expand a road in Lake County. | Rob Dicker/ Sun-Times file

By [Sun-Times Editorial Board](#)

Chicago sorely needs a better network of buses, trains and bicycles, although not entirely at the expense of leaving cars stuck in traffic jams.

The [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) has drafted a plan to fix some of the worst traffic choke points in the Chicago region, largely by widening roads and adding new ones. CMAP executive director Joseph C. Szabo calls it a “fix it first” approach.

But another group that’s much keener on biking, walking and using public transportation — the [Active Transportation Alliance](#) — has a different idea. In a study of its own, released on Monday, the alliance contends that in the most 40 years of operating highways, road building has done nothing but

make Chicago-area traffic congestion worse. When you build or widen a road, the alliance explains, you just invite more people to drive cars.

The alliance opposes CMAP's plan and wants to put a hold on major highway improvements.

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What's your take? You can weigh in on CMAP's draft plan until the end of Tuesday. To do so, you can fill out a [form](http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/onto2050) at <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/onto2050>. Or comment by email at [ONTO2050@cmap.illinois.gov](mailto:ONTO2050@cmap.illinois.gov). Or call at 312-454-0400. You can also write to: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 233 South Wacker Drive, Suite 800, Chicago, Illinois 60606.

Our own view is that the Active Transportation Alliance has the better end of the argument, though it takes it too far. The Chicago region is, indeed, too dependent on automobiles, much more so than metro areas like New York and Washington. And too often, decisions to build roads in the Chicago area have been driven by political and financial self-interest. There's big money to be made in building roads.

After investing huge sums year after year on building new and wider roads, the Chicago area still has some of the worst traffic congestion in the country, even as the percentage of commuters who walk, bike or take public transit lags. The alliance reports that about 36.5 percent of Chicago-area commuters bike, walk or take transit to work, compared to 67.7 percent for New York and 54.3 percent for Washington.

A reconsideration of transportation priorities in the Chicago region is long overdue, with a greater emphasis on buses, rail and bikes, though it need not be as extreme as called for by the alliance. The environmental advantages are obvious; automobiles are the single biggest cause of smog and greenhouse gases. Public transit also is more affordable for lower income people.

A key to greater employment for the chronically unemployed is to make it easier to get to work — a particularly serious problem on Chicago's far South Side. If one root of Chicago's violent crime problem is unemployment, one root of unemployment is an inadequate system of public transportation.

As it happens, all forms of transportation in the Chicago region have been deeply underfunded for decades, making it difficult to modernize both highways and transit systems.

Yes, Chicago has invested in bike paths, upgraded the Red and Purple lines of the CTA's elevated trains and modernized the Red line's 95th Street station. But more socially transformative plans, such as extending the Red Line to 130th Street — a \$2.3 billion project — are on hold for lack of funding.

Just keeping up with repairs has been tough. In February, the RTA reported that it will cost \$37.7 billion over the next 10 years to meet public transit's capital spending needs for maintenance in the six-county region. Both state and federal funding has been tight, with the CTA in its last budget actually sustaining a \$33 million cut in state funds for operating expenses.

The Active Transportation Alliance wants most construction for new or expanded expressways to be put on hold, but a more real-world solution would be to give the green light first to those CMAP projects that blend cars and public transit.

Specifically, we see merit, at least at first blush, in CMAP's proposal to expand I-55 and I-290. Lanes would be created that are open only to Pace buses and cars willing to pay a toll.

We urge you to weigh in with your own thoughts.

Send letters to: [letters@suntimes.com](mailto:letters@suntimes.com).

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